

# Civil Rights Journal: Churches Still Burning

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when event the "liberal" press began to start questioning the burnings of black churches. I guess once again my desperate desire that this nation begin to talk about and deal with the racism which is a part of life in America had outweighed my own cumulative life experience. Far too many Americans still are willing to deny what they see on videotapes, what they live in their own communities and what they know in their own hearts to be the case -- racism is still alive and well in America.

Black churches are still burning in this nation, although it is no longer on the front pages (or back pages, for that matter) of our newspapers or on the nightly television news. But in late July and early August seven more churches burned: two in Arkansas, two in Alabama and one each in

Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas. According to USA Today, which has done the most in depth and ongoing coverage of the burnings, "Black churches in the South continue to burn at the same rapid rate that pushed the arsons to the top of the national agenda one month ago. The pace of the arsons - more than one a week - guarantees that 1996 will be the worst year for Black church arsons in this decade."

Nevertheless, the Wall Street Journal and Atlantic Monthly have impelled in recent articles that the burnings have been used by the National Council of Churches to raise dollars for itself and that there is no real conspiracy of white supremacist groups and that therefore we should not be overly concerned about what is going on.

Both of these assumptions are dangerous and both of them are wrong. As the scope of the church fires

began to be known in early 1996, the National Council of Churches, an ecumenical organization composed of 32 Protestant and Orthodox denominations, focused its efforts in reaching out to those churches which had been burned. It was only natural that these denominations work together rather than individually on this issue and they were joined by Catholics, Jews and Muslims.

The NCC also worked together with the Center for Democratic Renewal and the Center for Constitutional Rights to investigate the fires. They have found that there have been 75 arson attacks on black churches from January 1, 1995 through July 31, 1996, more than double the number (28) counted during the previous five years combined. While there have been a similar number of white churches burned during that time period, since African Americans are

only 12 percent of the population, proportionately four times as many black churches are burning.

In addition, they have documented case after case where there was spray-painting of racist graffiti, use of molotov cocktails and other incendiary devices, vandalism and targeting of churches with a history of strong advocacy for African American rights, including death threats and racist insults by phone at night and by mail. At least 13 of the fires since January 1990 have taken place around Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. They have found evidence of racist motivation in the majority of cases, with several clearly connected to white supremacist groups.

While no national conspiracy of white supremacist groups has yet to be found, if these are the acts of individual or small groups of racists is that less dangerous for race relations? Does that mean the rest of us can relax, take a breath and go on with business as usual?

Finally, the NCC has indicated

that about 85 percent of the funds they are receiving are being used for the restoration of the burned churches. The balance of the contributions are being used for programs to address racism and for administration of the funds. But, if the donors indicate they want their contribution only used for rebuilding, the NCC is honoring the request. Some \$2 million has already been approved by its Grants Committee, on which I sit. Churches are being rebuilt, hymnals and Bibles are being replaced, pews and altars are being built.

But the NCC has also taken the position that it would be futile to rebuild the churches and do nothing about combating the underlying causes. "We must take such a holistic approach lest we rebuild churches only to have them burn down again," said Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, General Secretary of the NCC.

Black churches are still burning and we still have work to do. We must re-build the churches and we must build a racism-free nation.

## Policy Analyst/ Legislative Liaison

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## Thriftway zone change without street closure

BY LEE PERLMAN

The United Grocers cooperative won a battle, but may have lost the war, in the efforts to build a new Thriftway Market on Northeast 33rd Avenue at Killingsworth Street.

Last Wednesday City Council unanimously approved a Comprehensive Plan map change for the property, including a change from residential to commercial use for a satellite parking lot south of Northeast Emerson Street. The designation was for a CS zone, as recommended by a city hearings officer last month, rather than the CN2 zone the coop had sought. Among other things, the change means that the new store could not have a 137-space parking lot as planned. However, United Grocers consultant Lans Stout said "We think we can make it work" with the CS zone.

A more serious issue is the coop's proposed vacation of Northeast Emerson Street to connect the two parcels of land and expand the site to accommodate a 40,000 square foot store. The issue was not before the Council Wednesday, but com-

missioners Charlie Hales and Gretchen Kafoury both indicated they would oppose it if it ever is presented. "I can't stop you from trying, but creating a footprint for a suburban store is going nowhere with me," Hales said.

Hales cited the Irvington Market in northeast Portland, the Nature's and Zupan's stores in southeast, and Strohecker's in southwest as examples of new markets that were able to develop within a standard street grid. Mayor Vera Katz cited an older Thriftway market in northwest.

Stout said the project "probably won't necessarily die without the street vacation."

United Grocers Real Estate Development Manager Roger Staver was less optimistic. "We have a design for a store with a street vacation and an operator lined up to manage it, and we have no design and no operator for one without it," he said after the vote. "This site may become a Pay Less."

J.C. Kizak of the Concordia Neighborhood Association testified to her group's strong support for a new Thriftway on the site. Sue Chase and Steve McKenster, both residents of

Northeast 34th Avenue, testified against it. McKenster said he and his neighbors realized the property will someday be redeveloped and said, "We're not opposed to a store there, just to this store." Chase said that the effect of the store on traffic on nearby streets hadn't been properly assessed, and that the zone change should not be granted until it was. Planner Susan McKinney said such concerns could be addressed when the city reviews actual development plans.

McKinney argued that the plan designation changes should be made whether a Thriftway is built on the site or not. The current zoning "virtually assures that there will be no new development there," she told Council. Leaving it vacant, in turn, would be "a barrier to the redevelopment of the area," she said.

Hales praised United Grocers' willingness to replace a former Thriftway store on the site that was closed in 1993, and its willingness to work with the community. "There are a number of good things going on here," he said. "There's a neighborhood that's getting healthier, and there's a retailer who realizes that."

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